

I. Dynasty 591

Chapter 591

“Your Highness, the total number of new recruits conscripted from the six prefectures this time is 20,000. After all, the number of young and strong common people in the six prefectures is limited. However, relatively speaking, the number of soldiers enlisted from Pengzhou, Yangzhou, Huaizhou, and Tongzhou is quite large. Lu Fei said that Pengzhou alone has 10,000 new recruits, totaling about 25,000 with the new recruits from Huaizhou. And the number of new recruits reported by Ye Qingyun is even higher than Lu Fei’s, totaling 30,000.”

In the camp of the Qingzhou Grand Camp, Niu Ben reported the conscription matters to Xiao Ming.

“Seventy-five thousand people!” Xiao Ming was somewhat surprised to hear this number. It had already exceeded his expectations, as this time the new recruits joined voluntarily, not by forced conscription.

Niu Ben nodded, with a proud expression. He said, “In this battle in Wei, we lost 3,000 soldiers. Now that these troops have been replenished, the state’s army totals 160,000 people, including 100,000 infantry, 40,000 cavalry, and 20,000 charioteers.”

“160,000 people, hmm, the annual military pay alone will be close to two million taels, and that doesn’t include the cost of warhorses and equipment,” Xiao Ming sighed. If it weren’t for the war, he really wouldn’t want to maintain such a large military force. The number of new recruits conscripted this time was almost equal to the number of veteran soldiers from before.

Niu Ben said, “Your Highness, our number of soldiers is not considered large. According to this subordinate’s understanding, Prince Wei, Prince Yan, Prince Liang, and Prince Zhao are all conscripting soldiers, some even directly kidnapping able-bodied men to fill their armies. Now that the world is in chaos, who doesn’t want to hold heavy troops and contend for supremacy?”

“You are not wrong, but these vassal princes forcibly conscripting men are now provoking widespread resentment. I cannot imitate them. A stable rear is the foundation of conquest. Furthermore, quality matters more than quantity in troops. The current number of troops has reached the number I have in mind. These four prefectures we have just taken can support these 75,000 men.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Niu Ben said.

“Also, the training for these new recruits must not be relaxed. You must train them as strictly as you train the Qingzhou Army,” Xiao Ming said.

“Your Highness, if I cannot even do this well, I might as well go back to farming,” Niu Ben laughed a few times. Then he pointed to the training ground outside and said, “Your Highness, please look. Those are the new recruits being trained. According to the training manual, when these new recruits first enter the barracks, they must first train their physical strength, endurance, and discipline. Only when their bodies are strong and they can strictly obey discipline will they proceed to musket loading and firing training.”

Xiao Ming looked outside and motioned for Niu Ben to join him in walking towards the training ground to observe the training of these new recruits.

Unlike the traditional training methods of Great Yu Empire soldiers, Xiao Ming’s army now belonged to a modern army, so its training and subjects were naturally different from those of a feudal army.

Precisely because of this, new recruits, upon entering the army, did not immediately begin combat formation training, but first began physical training. After all, if a soldier had no strength to tie a chicken, his survival rate on the battlefield would still be very low.

Just now, in the tent, Niu Ben had explained very thoroughly. Generally speaking, training a feudal army into a modern army required several points: first, modern national and state concepts; second, a high spirit of martial valor, where the status of soldiers was no longer lowly; third, strict discipline; fourth,

scientific training, which included reasonable allocation of physical energy, diet, and sleep; fifth, strict drills, such as shooting, exercises, formations, folding blankets, and internal affairs; sixth, selection of grassroots officers and theoretical study at military academies; and seventh, standardized equipment.

Now, for the Qingzhou Army, all seven of these points had been met, which meant that the Qingzhou Army had completed its transformation from a feudal cold weapon unit to a hot weapon modern army.

After observing the physical training of the new recruits on the training ground for a while, Xiao Ming and Niu Ben walked towards a resting new recruit camp. At this time, the soldiers in the new recruit camp were sitting on the ground.

And the military historian, dressed in a dark green military uniform, was explaining what a nation and a country were to the new recruits.

The new recruit camp historian immediately shouted upon seeing Xiao Ming and Niu Ben approach: "All stand up, salute!"

Under the historian's command, the new recruits immediately stood up and saluted Niu Ben and Xiao Ming in unison. Seeing this, Xiao Ming smiled with satisfaction. According to Niu Ben, the first thing these new recruits learned upon entering the camp was to obey orders.

"Continue," Xiao Ming said. He wanted to hear how the military historian instilled ideological education in the soldiers.

After the soldiers sat down, the military historian spoke of the Hall of Heroes, implying that being a soldier was a noble thing, and dying on the battlefield was a soldier's most glorious destiny.

Next, the military historian recounted the history of Great Yu Empire's humiliation by barbarians, and the soldiers gradually became agitated, as the barbarians' atrocities were not distant from them at all.

After stirring up the soldiers' emotions, the historian timely began to sing the Qingzhou Army's battle song, and the soldiers, their faces flushed with excitement, followed the historian in singing.

Having observed the military historian's work in the army throughout, Xiao Ming felt at ease. He looked towards Jinling City in the south. In a few months, he would lead his army forward.

The Great Yu Empire had suffered too much. He would use the army in his hand as a sharp sword to cut through the darkness that enveloped the Great Yu Empire.

"Your Highness, are you satisfied with the training of these new recruits?" Niu Ben asked with a smile as he escorted Xiao Ming to the gate of the Qingzhou Grand Camp.

"Barely," Xiao Ming didn't want Niu Ben to be too complacent. He reminded him, "The only thing that dissatisfies me is the selection of grassroots officers. You need to strengthen this. I looked at the list in Bowen Academy. Many generals are from military families, and there are still too few generals like Zhu Sansi. In a few days, I will separate the Military Academy from Bowen Academy and expand the scale of grassroots officer training. This time, you should select more excellent generals without background to enter for study."

Niu Ben nodded upon hearing this. It wasn't that he deliberately gave preferential treatment, but most grassroots officers are illiterate. To enter the academy for study, they first had to learn to read. It was for this reason that he first selected those who could read.

Now that Xiao Ming brought it up, he had to explain.

“Most of the grassroots officers are illiterate, Your Highness.”

“This reason?” Xiao Ming frowned and said, “How about this, leave the matter of these generals learning to read to me. I will personally teach them to read.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Niu Ben was a little envious. It was truly a blessing from their ancestors that these fellows could be personally taught by Prince Qi.

Xiao Ming naturally had his own considerations for taking such pains. If the military was still dominated by generals from military families, his army would inevitably experience factionalism among its generals. In such a case, if such a modern army were to mutiny, it would be a very serious matter.

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The shouts of the soldiers in training echoed throughout the Qingzhou Grand Camp.

Looking at the high-spirited soldiers, Xiao Ming felt much more at ease. The saying “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun” has been true since ancient times. As long as he held the army, any enemy before him could be crushed.

Leaving the Qingzhou Grand Camp, Xiao Ming returned to his princely estate. At this time, he began to concentrate on writing books on mechanical engineering. The age of steam had just begun, and only by producing all the machinery of this era could he upgrade Qingzhou’s various industries.

Otherwise, with Qingzhou's current industrial base, advancing towards the internal combustion engine and electricity era would face heavy resistance. After all, in this era, no one would provide him with ready-made industrial products to upgrade technology.

Taking advantage of the truce with Wei, Xiao Ming immersed himself in the internal affairs of the state. In addition to compiling mechanical engineering books, as he promised Niu Ben, he began teaching grassroots generals literacy at Bowen Academy.

At the same time, he officially began to split Bowen Academy and categorize its disciplines more specifically. Thus, Qingzhou formally established the Qingzhou Military Academy, Qingzhou Medical Academy, and Qingzhou Political Affairs Academy.

The original Bowen Academy became purely a comprehensive university for subjects such as chemistry, physics, astronomy, mining, and shipbuilding.

The reason Xiao Ming did this was very simple: to standardize Qingzhou's education, so that those who pursued scholarship specialized in scholarship, those who engaged in politics specialized in politics, and those who engaged in military affairs specialized in military affairs.

In this busyness, three months passed in the blink of an eye. Qingzhou's weather gradually turned cold, followed by heavy snow, and then another New Year.

However, compared to previous years, this New Year in Qingzhou had a different flavor. In the past, every New Year, officials and imperial relatives from Chang'an would always pay their respects to Xiao Wenxuan.

But this year, officials and imperial relatives from Chang'an all took the opportunity to pay New Year's respects to Xiao Ming. The prince estate suddenly became much livelier. Of course, the purpose of many officials and imperial relatives visiting him was not simple; after studying at Bowen Academy for half a year, some of them were eager to resume their official duties.

Among them, what they were most concerned about was the position of cabinet minister. Currently, only two of the nine cabinet ministers were serving, and the remaining seven positions were still vacant. Everyone wanted to enter this supreme power institution of the state.

"Your Highness, officials are now discussing the cabinet positions quite a lot. Currently, among the nine cabinet assistants, only I and Elder Fiji are serving. As for the remaining seven, I do not know if Your Highness has suitable candidates. After all, the state's affairs have suddenly increased with four more prefectures, and I and Elder Fiji are worried that it will become increasingly difficult to handle them in time."

After New Year's Eve, Pang Yukun and Fiji went together to the princely estate to pay New Year's respects to Xiao Ming. After reciting the New Year's greetings, Pang Yukun spoke first.

"Yes, Your Highness, as long as the nine cabinet assistant positions are not finalized, the hearts of the officials will not be at ease for a day. It is inevitable that there will be mutual infighting on weekdays, after all, everyone wants to show off," Fiji echoed.

Xiao Ming's eyes moved back and forth between the two. He said, "When did you two start colluding? Since you've said so, do you have candidates in mind?"

Pang Yukun belonged to the Legalist school, while Fiji was a staunch Confucian scholar. Because of this, although the two cooperated wholeheartedly in government affairs, they privately disliked each other.

Of course, this dislike was not personal, but rather directed at the schools they each supported, similar to how liberal arts and science students might not see eye to eye.

Although Xiao Ming had been busy dealing with internal affairs and resolving some difficult issues in the fiefdom during this period, he never slackened his supervision of the state, especially concerning Qingzhou's developments, which he almost controlled in real-time under the surveillance of the Secret Guard.

Generally speaking, after adapting to the Qingzhou environment, the officials who came from Chang'an gradually began to clash with the local officials. During this period, quite a few officials visited Fijian's residence.

Of course, there was also a reason for the behavior of these Chang'an officials, because ever since this group of officials from Chang'an arrived in Qingzhou, the local officials had been wary of them.

Simply put, they did not welcome these people. It was precisely because of this atmosphere of mutual wariness that the two factions of officials now disliked each other.

Before the New Year, he even received an impeachment memorial against the county magistrate of Dongyang County in Qingzhou for corruption and bribery.

"Your Highness, I have no candidates in mind. Since the political system has been established, it needs to be completed," Pang Yukun said.

"I concur," Fiji said.

He glanced lightly at the two of them and said, "I don't have suitable candidates either for now. In any case, you two can still handle the current government affairs, so please bear with the hard work for now. As for the rest, I will assess the political achievements of each official. If I am satisfied, I will consider promoting them to the cabinet."

Pang Yukun and Fiji exchanged glances. In fact, they didn't want to ask about this either, but they were forced to by the officials.

Although they privately disliked each other's revered schools of thought, their purpose of assisting Xiao Ming in achieving great things was the same. However, due to the chaos in Chang'an leading to a distinction between local officials and Chang'an officials, they were also quite helpless.

"Yes, Your Highness." Xiao Ming had spoken, and the two no longer brought it up.

Looking at the fluttering light snow outside the main hall, Xiao Ming said sternly, "I know what you two are thinking, and I know what other officials are thinking. Mutual supervision is a good thing, but I cannot tolerate colluding to frame colleagues. I hope you will conduct yourselves well."

Pang Yukun and Fiji's hearts sank, and they both responded in unison, "Yes."

As the two departed, Imperial Concubine Zhen entered the main hall, supported by Lu Luo. Looking back at Fiji and Pang Yukun, Imperial Concubine Zhen said, "It's quite rare for Chief Grand Secretary Pang and Elder Fiji to come together to pay their New Year's respects to you."

In front of Imperial Concubine Zhen, Xiao Ming completely relaxed. He said, "Those two have bad intentions; they both want to put their own people into the cabinet."

"Alas, officialdom is truly a double-edged sword. I never thought that someone with a straightforward temper like Pang Yukun would become so cunning now," Imperial Concubine Zhen said, reaching out to smooth Xiao Ming's wrinkled clothes. "I've also heard about the matter between the state officials and the Chang'an officials, but this is a good thing for Your Highness."

"Mother Concubine is right. It's not about fearing these officials undermining each other; it's about fearing them protecting each other," Xiao Ming said thoughtfully.

Imperial Concubine Zhen nodded, "Your imperial father once said that factional struggle is a double-edged sword. Used skillfully, it leads to smooth governance and peace in the land. Used poorly, it leads to internal chaos and nationwide slaughter. Whether it leads to smooth governance or chaos depends solely on your strategy."

"Even so, I am still unwilling to see the existence of factional struggle," Xiao Ming sighed.

Imperial Concubine Zhen smiled, "Officials are also human. As long as they are human, they have seven emotions and six desires. With desires, they will attract like-minded individuals. Moreover, 'official' has two mouths [a play on words for 'official' and 'mouth' in Chinese], so constant bickering is the nature of the court."

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"Mother Concubine's lesson is well-taken."

Xiao Ming smiled. Having been exposed to the court alongside Xiao Wenxuan, Imperial Concubine Zhen understood court affairs better than he did. As Imperial Concubine Zhen said, there were always conflicts among officials in any dynasty.

He, too, could not avoid this problem, and what he should do was to utilize these contradictions to make governance more harmonious.

Precisely for this reason, he had always been unyielding on the issue of the nine cabinet assistants, precisely to make the two factions of officials convert their conflicts into motivation for handling government affairs, making the internal administration run more smoothly.

At the same time, officials who disliked each other could also serve to supervise each other, just like a ruling party and an opposition party, ferreting out corrupt officials from the opposing camp amidst their quarrels.

“Alright, you think about this matter yourself. Your’er and I are going to watch a play. I hear there’s a new play out at the theater.” Imperial Concubine Zhen was just passing by the main hall and came in to take a look.

Xiao Ming nodded and said to Qian Dafu, who was following Imperial Concubine Zhen, “Steward Qian, pay attention to Mother Concubine’s safety.”

“Your Highness, with this old servant here, there will be no problems,” Qian Dafu said with a smile.

Supported by Lu Luo, the three slowly exited the main hall. Xiao Ming then stretched and walked outside.

For the past five months, he hadn't had a single day of leisure: teaching grassroots generals, supervising production in various industries, writing books, training new recruits. At the same time, a bountiful harvest before the New Year had made the state's granaries well-stocked.

And Yue Yun's return from the Sanmyo Kingdom with 800,000 shi of grain further boosted Xiao Ming's confidence.

Everything was gradually being completed through his efforts. Xiao Ming once again turned his gaze towards Jinling City. It was time to act. He had many enemies and could not continue to be bogged down with Prince Wei.

Moreover, the sooner Wei was taken, the fewer losses there would be. Prince Wei's scorched-earth policy in Yangzhou last time had given him quite a headache.

Half a month passed in a blink of an eye. After the New Year, the weather gradually warmed, and the snow on the roads melted. At this time, Xiao Ming urgently ordered Lu Fei and Ye Qingyun to return to Qingzhou from their respective garrisoned cities.

After the order was given, Ye Qingyun diverted his route from the sea to reach Qingzhou, while Lu Fei arrived earlier than Ye Qingyun.

After the two returned, Xiao Ming summoned them and Niu Ben to the main hall for a discussion.

"Your Highness, is it time to act?" Lu Fei asked excitedly.

Xiao Ming's expression was serious. He said, "Indeed, the six-month period has ended. It is now time to take Wei in one swift move. However, how have you two trained the new recruits?"

Ye Qingyun said, "Your Highness, the new recruits I trained are ready for battle at any time."

"My new recruits are also ready," Lu Fei said confidently. Now, the new recruits he had recruited were not only fully trained but also fully equipped with standardized gear.

Xiao Ming nodded. He then stood up, facing the map on the wall of the main hall, and said, "Lu Fei, after you return, you will be responsible for a feigned attack on Chuzhou. Ye Qingyun, Yue Yun will help you go straight to Jinling City. To catch a thief, first catch the king. If we can directly capture Jinling City, Wei will surely fall into chaos, and then conquering other prefectures and counties will be as easy as turning over one's hand."

Upon hearing this, a peculiar glint flickered in their eyes. If this plan succeeded, Wei would be entirely incorporated into the state's territory. A wealthy Wei, coupled with the musketeers, meant that Prince Zhao would also not be their opponent.

"Yes, Your Highness," Lu Fei and Ye Qingyun stood up simultaneously and saluted Xiao Ming.

At this moment, Niu Ben said, "Lu Fei, after you return, you will set off for Chuzhou on February 6th. Ye Qingyun, after you return, you will set off for Jinling City on February 15th."

The two nodded upon hearing this.

With the battle plan for Wei decided, the entire state began to operate. Li San's Secret Guard continuously sent intelligence on Wei to the army, while a batch of provisions departed from Yizhou and arrived in Pengzhou.

After Lu Fei returned to Pengzhou, he immediately led 45,000 men towards Chuzhou. As soon as the army moved, Wei's scouts quickly relayed the news to Jinling City.

"What! Lu Fei's army is marching towards Chuzhou?" In Prince Wei's mansion, Prince Wei almost jumped out of his chair.

"Your Highness, it is absolutely true. This time, the southern expeditionary army, with about forty-five thousand men, is heading for Chuzhou. There are over a hundred cannons alone. Prince Qi is preparing to completely annihilate us," a powerful family member from Chuzhou said tremblingly.

Prince Wei's face was extremely grim. "Xiao Ming, you scoundrel, what kind of truce agreement is this? This is a trap, a trap!"

The officials in the main hall of Wei were all terrified. Chuzhou was only 300 li from Jinling City. Now they had no retreat.

Xiao Han's face was even uglier than Prince Wei's. He hadn't even been a prince for a day, and now his country was about to perish. How could he be willing? Thinking of this, he hastily said, "Father King, Xiao Ming must despise us for paying too little silver in compensation. We can continue to cede territory and pay indemnities."

Prince Wei roared, “Fool! What Xiao Ming wants now is not land nor silver. He wants my life! Giving him anything is useless! I have managed Wei for over twenty years, and I never thought that today I would prepare a wedding dress for someone else.”

Slowly sitting down, Prince Wei’s expression was frantic: “Xiao Ming wants a prosperous Wei to contend for supremacy. I will precisely not give him this opportunity! You are to immediately inform the Chuzhou generals to burn everything that can be burned in the city! Also, Shouzhou, Taizhou, Suzhou, and Jinling City! Burn everything!”

“Your Highness, absolutely not!”

“You cannot, Your Highness!”

“...”

In the main hall, all the ministers cried out. Xiao Han’s heart also grew cold. He looked at his father. At this moment, he was not the once formidable Prince Wei, but a madman.

“Imperial Father, if everything is burned, we will surely die without a burial place. Now, there is only one path: ceding territory,” Xiao Han pleaded bitterly. He was willing to exchange all the cities of Wei for the prosperity and wealth of Jinling City.

“Shut up! I knew I shouldn’t have compromised in the first place! It’s all you spineless cowards! Since Xiao Ming is pushing so hard, I will fight him! If any of you dare to say ‘no’ again, don’t blame my merciless blade.”

With that, Prince Wei suddenly drew the precious sword from his waist, his eyes blazing with fury.

Prince Wei’s fierce appearance startled Xiao Han and all the officials. They had never seen Prince Wei look so ferocious.

Scanning the crowd, Prince Wei said, “Xiao Ming is too deceitful! All of you, quickly gather your household retainers and personal guards! I don’t believe that Wei’s 400,000 strong army can’t defeat Xiao Ming’s meager forces.”

Xiao Han and the officials exchanged glances. In the past six months, Prince Wei had gathered provincial troops from various prefectures and increased Jinling City’s garrison to 200,000. All these actions were in response to Xiao Ming’s threat.

But no one expected Xiao Ming to launch an attack immediately after the New Year.

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In Chuzhou, the army led by Lu Fei had been stationed here for five days.

According to Xiao Ming’s order, he was to besiege Chuzhou without attacking, attracting Prince Wei’s army for a rescue attempt to empty Jinling City of its forces, thereby preparing for Ye Qingyun to take Jinling City in one fell swoop.

“General, the horse traps around the camp have all been dug,” Bai Mu said as he entered the tent.

Beyond Pengzhou City, the terrain of Wei was mostly flat. Their camp was now pitched on a flat area, with wide-open surroundings, making them extremely vulnerable targets for cavalry.

So, after setting up camp, Lu Fei had the soldiers dig horse traps to prevent surprise attacks from Prince Wei’s cavalry.

Now, as they ventured deeper into Wei territory, Lu Fei’s tension also rose, because he knew that Prince Wei’s elite personal guard had still not appeared, and these soldiers were Prince Wei’s true trump card.

These forces included 30,000 cavalry, 8,000 musketeers, and a huge number of traditional cold weapon units. If Prince Wei became desperate and committed all these forces to the Chuzhou battlefield, it would truly be a tough fight for them.

After all, in such a situation, even he could not guarantee victory. It was precisely for this reason that he was so cautious.

After Bai Mu reported, a scout responsible for reconnaissance hurriedly entered the tent. He said to Lu Fei, “General, another 30,000 cavalry are rushing towards Chuzhou City. At the same time, there is a large number of infantry following the cavalry, numbering around 100,000.”

As soon as these words were uttered, Lu Fei’s face turned green. He consoled himself, “Bai Mu, did you see that? This time, we are the main attacking force. This shows that His Highness trusts me very much. That boy Ye Qingyun’s standing is not enough; he can only do sneaky things.”

Bai Mu rolled his eyes and said, "General, it seems Prince Wei is preparing to fight us with his back to the wall this time. All of Wei's remaining cavalry have been dispatched."

"What's there to fear? Haven't I dug trenches and horse traps?" Lu Fei said.

As the two were speaking, the city gate of Chuzhou suddenly opened, and then a group of infantry, clad in armor, holding shields in their left hands and hengdao sabers in their right, surged out from the city gate.

Following closely behind these soldiers were archers wearing green lining. After exiting the city, these soldiers immediately formed battle formations. At this moment, every soldier's expression was very solemn.

The unusual movement of the Chuzhou garrison attracted the attention of the Southern Expeditionary Army. At this moment, Lu Fei walked out of his tent, picked up his telescope, and observed the Chuzhou army 700 meters away.

"Gentlemen, the Chuzhou garrison has kept its gates closed for many days without fighting, but today they suddenly arrayed for battle. It seems Prince Wei is truly prepared to fight a tough battle with us in Chuzhou."

Luo Xin also walked over at this time and said, "General, this unusual move by Chuzhou must be a trick. Although Prince Wei is incompetent, Wei still has some excellent generals. We cannot let down our guard in this battle."

Lu Fei pondered for a while and said, "Are they planning to use a human wall to block gunfire, and then have archers shoot at us after they get close?"

"Hmm, General, what you said makes sense. They learned about the range and power of our firearms from the battles of Pengzhou and Huaizhou. This time, they might have a countermeasure," Luo Hong said.

Lu Fei nodded, "But they also underestimate our firearms too much. Have the soldiers array for battle, Luo Xin, switch to grapeshot."

"Yes." Everyone received the order and departed.

At this moment, on the city wall of Chuzhou, Xiao Han and Chen Wei, the Governor of Chuzhou, stood on the city wall. Looking at the Southern Expeditionary Army's camp, Xiao Han said, "Has the Southern Expeditionary Army not attacked all this time?"

Chen Wei said, "Your Royal Highness, I believe that their besieging without attacking is to pin down the armies of Jinling City and other prefectures. The truly dangerous army might be the one from Yangzhou."

"Jinling City is impregnable, and Yangzhou and Tongzhou are isolated without aid. They can barely defend themselves, how could they attack Jinling City?" Xiao Han sneered.

Chen Wei's face was a little awkward. He said, "Your Royal Highness, I am absolutely not exaggerating. Prince Qi always uses unconventional tactics and may very well take desperate risks."

Xiao Han was a little impatient. He didn't want to fight at all, but this time Prince Wei had gone mad, ordering him to personally lead troops to reinforce Chuzhou City and making him responsible for defeating the Southern Expeditionary Army led by Lu Fei.

"No need to say more. With Imperial Father in Jinling City, nothing will go wrong. Now, let's think about how to deal with the current Southern Expeditionary Army, otherwise, we will have difficulty explaining ourselves to Imperial Father."

Chen Wei assented. He looked at the formed Southern Expeditionary Army camp and said, "The strength of the Southern Expeditionary Army lies in its firearms. Infantry suffers greatly when fighting them. Therefore, I plan to use a strategy of combined infantry and archer attacks, along with cavalry raids, to defeat the Southern Expeditionary Army."

"This time I brought 30,000 elite cavalry, plus the local garrison and 100,000 soldiers, it should be no problem to deal with them, right?" Xiao Han asked.

"If well coordinated, there should be no problem." Chen Wei pondered for a moment, "However, I believe it's best not to launch an offensive."

Xiao Han said, "Do you think I want to? Imperial Father is like a madman now, insisting that I must defeat the Southern Expeditionary Army this time, to dampen Xiao Ming's morale, to stop war with war, alas."

Chen Wei's expression immediately darkened upon hearing this. Even if the Southern Expeditionary Army only had forty or fifty thousand men, he did not believe that Prince Wei's army could defeat Xiao Ming's, because in terms of morale alone, there was no comparison between the soldiers.

These troops, for him, were more than enough for defense but insufficient for offense.

However, since Xiao Han had given the order, he could only bite the bullet. But before he could give his own order, the Southern Expeditionary Army soldiers came out of their camp and headed towards the city gate.

At this time, Luo Hong led his soldiers across the three-meter-wide passages over the trenches and rushed towards the gate of Chuzhou City. The trenches they dug were not continuous; every hundred meters, there was a three-meter section that was not dug. These areas were heavily guarded by infantry, specifically to concentrate forces to annihilate cavalry. After analysis, Lu Fei believed that the Chuzhou army's purpose was to attack by using infantry as a human wall, archers for attrition, and finally cavalry for a decisive strike.

Therefore, after deliberation, they decided to adopt a strategy of feigned defeat to lure the cavalry out of the city and deliver a heavy blow to the cavalry supporting Chuzhou.

The 700-meter road was not far for the soldiers. Luo Hong led 10,000 soldiers in a square formation, advancing slowly.

As they advanced, more and more infantry appeared outside Chuzhou City. They were divided into three sections: left, center, and right, neatly arrayed opposite them. "The Southern Expeditionary Army really underestimates us. Do they think 10,000 men can defeat us?" Xiao Han scoffed. This time, they had dispatched 20,000 infantry, and 30,000 cavalry in the city were already assembled, ready to charge out of the city gate to meet the enemy at any moment. Seeing the Southern Expeditionary Army soldiers

gradually moving away from their camp, he revealed a cruel smile. In his opinion, the Southern Expeditionary Army's generals were nothing special.

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"Your Royal Highness, beware of trickery."

Chen Wei looked at the 10,000 men with some uncertainty.

Xiao Han said displeasedly, "Imperial Father was right about you being too suspicious. Isn't this army leaving the main camp a golden opportunity for us to make a merit?"

After a pause, he said, "Don't hesitate any longer, attack!"

"But!" Chen Wei still hesitated.

"Hmm, are you the commander or am I the commander?" Xiao Han said angrily.

Chen Wei sighed heavily at this, having long heard that this Prince was self-willed and ignorant. Now he finally understood.

Now that Xiao Han had given the order, he had no choice but to obey, so he ordered the army outside the city to engage in battle.

At this time, Luo Hong's musketeers and Chuzhou's main army were only 200 meters apart, neatly arrayed. Looking at the densely packed Chuzhou soldiers, Luo Hong licked his dry lips and smiled at the new recruit beside him, "Boy, scared?"

The new recruit said, "Not scared, just a little nervous for my first time on the battlefield."

"Hahahaha..." Luo Hong laughed heartily. "Our Southern Expeditionary Army fought bloody battles in Pengzhou City and Huaizhou City, and not a single soldier retreated a step. This is the spirit of our army: facing death bravely, pressing forward with courage."

Luo Hong's words made the new recruit's blood boil, and his right hand holding the musket trembled slightly. "General, I will not disgrace the Southern Expeditionary Army."

"Very good. However, today we are going to feign defeat. This is also a kind of bravery," Luo Hong said, looking ahead.

The distance between the two sides grew shorter. Just then, the Chuzhou army suddenly shouted, "Kill!"

Instantly, the Chuzhou army, 100 meters away, suddenly charged madly towards the Southern Expeditionary Army.

At this moment, Luo Hong immediately ordered to fire.

"Bang, bang, bang..." Gunshots rang out. A batch of Chuzhou troops fell, but the remaining Chuzhou troops still charged forward fearlessly, and the archers behind them also drew their bows and prepared to shoot.

Lu Fei had been observing the battlefield situation. Seeing the Chuzhou army adopt this combat method, his heart suddenly sank by half. 'This army is definitely an elite force! I wonder who trained them.'

Just as he was getting nervous, the two armies drew closer. Once within the archers' firing range, the archers unleashed a volley of arrows towards the Southern Expeditionary Army.

When the arrow rain fell, many Southern Expeditionary Army soldiers immediately fell. At this moment, Luo Hong gave the order to retreat, and the soldiers, supporting the wounded, quickly fell back.

Seeing this scene, Xiao Han on the city wall burst into laughter, "The Southern Expeditionary Army is nothing more than that. The failures in Pengzhou City and Huaizhou City were merely due to your generals' incompetence. Men, have the cavalry charge out of the city and kill the routed soldiers."

"Yes." The Chuzhou army's morale greatly boosted.

After the order was given, the cavalry in the city immediately surged out like a steel torrent towards the scattered Southern Expeditionary Army.

This time, Chen Wei rode in the middle, charging forward. The Southern Expeditionary Army was already close, and in a blink of an eye, they could charge right up to them. At this moment, the cavalry raised their weapons. Although he was confused, he couldn't retreat in the midst of tens of thousands of troops and could only charge forward. But the next moment, he suddenly saw the most terrifying scene of his life. The cavalry in front of him suddenly dropped as if dumplings falling into a pot. Instantly, the screams of men and warhorses echoed across the battlefield.

But this was only the first step. At this moment, the fleeing musketeers immediately turned around and fired rounds of shots at their cavalry. With traps and shooting combined, the Chuzhou cavalry suffered heavy casualties in an instant.

“We fell for it! Retreat, retreat!” Chen Wei desperately pulled on his reins, shouting the order to retreat at the top of his lungs, but the thousands of cavalry in front of him couldn’t stop their momentum and fell into the pits. The first pit was filled with horses and soldiers, and the cavalry behind continued to charge, then fell into the next pit, repeating endlessly.

Sweat instantly soaked his body. Chen Wei, with the remaining cavalry, retreated without looking back. An instinct told him he couldn’t continue charging.

But when he turned to flee, he despaired again. In his eyes appeared cavalry clad in silver cuirasses. These cavalry’s warhorses marched in neat strides, their thunderous sound like distant thunder, and the earth seemed to tremble.

Seeing this cavalry charging, he immediately directed a portion of his cavalry to intercept them, but the charging cavalry were directly dispersed by this group. These silver-armored cavalry were like gods of slaughter, fighting one against four.

Instantly, the cavalry he sent became disorganized. No one was willing to fight this group of cavalry anymore; they scattered, each fearing for their lives.

Bai Mu would not let this group of cavalry that had come out of the city escape. He led his cavalry, charging left and right through the fleeing Chuzhou cavalry, herding them like ducks, driving the remaining cavalry back into Chuzhou City.

And those Chuzhou infantry who had left the city were even more miserable, directly shattered by the cuirassiers, suffering heavy casualties.

“Hahahaha... these fools!” Bai Mu brandished his saber and laughed loudly at Xiao Han, who was standing on the city wall.

Xiao Han’s face turned red then green, then green then red. He never expected that, just as Chen Wei said, he had indeed fallen into a trap.

After laughing heartily, Bai Mu calmed down and said to his soldiers, “Don’t prolong the fight. Quickly clear the battlefield. These warhorses are good stuff.”

The Chuzhou cavalry retreated in disarray, with many soldiers eventually abandoning their horses and fleeing. The battlefield was now littered with abandoned warhorses, some left behind, some whose owners had died in battle, and many wounded warhorses lying on the ground, clearly beyond saving.

The cavalry, hearing this, formed a line and began to herd the warhorses. What Qingzhou lacked most right now were warhorses.

In the camp, Lu Fei smiled and handed the telescope to Luo Xin, “That fellow Bai Mu is just so worry-free!”

Luo Xin was also shocked. “As soon as Bai Mu made a move, the superiority of the cavalry became clear. The Chuzhou cavalry are completely no match for the Qingzhou cavalry.”

Lu Fei thought to himself, ‘That’s only natural. These cuirasses are thicker than their plate armor. Strictly speaking, this is heavy cavalry.’

With the Chuzhou army routed, the Southern Expeditionary Army began to clear the battlefield. Faced with the fierce Southern Expeditionary Army soldiers, most of the Chuzhou soldiers chose to surrender, while those who stubbornly resisted were shot dead by muskets.

Meanwhile, inside Chuzhou City, news of the initial battle’s failure quickly spread among the routed soldiers. This news caused panic among the supporting troops, as the fact once again proved the invincibility of the Southern Expeditionary Army.

On the city wall, Xiao Han’s face was ashen. He had witnessed a truly brutal war. Living in the wealthy Jinling City, he had never seen such a bloody battlefield.

Before, war was just a number of deaths to him, but now he understood what war truly was.

As Xiao Han trembled uncontrollably, Chen Wei, covered in blood, walked onto the city wall. He pointed at Xiao Han’s nose and cursed, “With Prince Wei like this, and the Crown Prince like this, Wei has no one with the demeanor of a virtuous ruler. How can Wei not perish?!”

Chapter 596

“Chen Wei, this is all your fault! If you hadn’t deserted in battle, how could we have suffered such a crushing defeat outside the city? Now, 8,000 cavalry are completely lost to the enemy; you cannot escape death!”

Chen Wei's angry accusation suddenly brought Xiao Han back to his senses. He pointed at the disheveled Chen Wei and shouted. After the initial defeat, not only were most of the Chuzhou army arrayed outside the city lost, but 8,000 of the cavalry he brought were also gone.

Recalling the King's order to absolutely hold Chuzhou City before his departure, Xiao Han's heart turned cold. If Chuzhou fell, there had to be a scapegoat to bear all the blame for him, and Chen Wei, the Governor of Chuzhou, was undoubtedly the most suitable person.

Chen Wei immediately became furious and yelled, "You're clearly trying to take credit and advance recklessly, how dare you pin it on me? This subordinate will report the details of this defeat to His Highness Prince Wei."

"Audacious! How dare you slander me? Don't forget, you are merely a servant of Prince Wei's mansion." There was a hint of disdain in Xiao Han's eyes. Then he said to the guards beside him, "Chen Wei, the Governor of Chuzhou, deserted in battle, a grave crime. Take him down and imprison him."

As soon as Xiao Han spoke, the captain on the city wall hastily said, "Your Royal Highness, absolutely not! At present, only Governor Chen can turn the tide. If Chuzhou City loses Governor Chen's command, the morale of the Chuzhou army will surely collapse."

"The Chuzhou army has been slaughtered and scattered by the Southern Expeditionary Army; how many are left? Now, this Chuzhou City relies on the troops brought by this humble prince. If 100,000 soldiers plus the remaining 20,000 cavalry cannot defeat the Southern Expeditionary Army, can they still not hold Chuzhou City?" Xiao Han said coldly.

When he entered the city, he was still somewhat wary of Chen Wei, but after most of the Chuzhou army outside the city was lost, he no longer feared Chen Wei. After all, what could a general without troops do?

Waving his hand, he still had his personal guards drag Chen Wei away.

The quarrel on the city wall did not escape Lu Fei's observation.

He said to Luo Hong, "Chen Wei seems to have been arrested."

"Excellent! Xiao Han is simply cutting off his own arm," Luo Hong said. He had seen Xiao Han when he was in Chang'an, so he recognized him at first sight when Xiao Han appeared on the city wall.

Picking up his telescope to confirm, Xiao Han continued, "General, this Chen Wei is a talented individual. He comes from the Chen family of Chuzhou, but he doesn't have an ounce of the arrogance of a powerful family's offspring. In the army, he eats and lives with the soldiers and is very considerate of them. For this reason, the combat effectiveness of the Chuzhou army surpasses that of other armies in Wei."

Lu Fei nodded. When the two armies were facing each other, Chen Wei's strategy was correct. If it hadn't been for the feigned defeat this time, and they had confronted directly, although they could have won completely, their losses would have been significant.

Because these Chuzhou troops fought in a reckless manner, which showed their morale.

"Looking at this, it seems Xiao Han intends to make Chen Wei a scapegoat. Cavalry has always been Prince Wei's treasure, and with such heavy losses now, Prince Wei will surely assign blame. But no matter what, this is good for us," Lu Fei slowly said.

Luo Xin then asked, "Are we going to bombard Chuzhou City next?"

"No need. Now that Prince Wei has crammed 130,000 men into a small Chuzhou City, the city's provisions will inevitably be unsustainable and can only be allocated from other cities. If that's the case, we will continue to besiege without attacking and simply cut off their supply lines," Lu Fei said.

Bai Mu had just returned at this time, and he said, "Leave the task of attacking the supply lines to this subordinate."

From Huaizhou to Jinling City, it was flat terrain, perfect for cavalry to exploit their advantage. He said, "Hmm, you are indeed the most suitable for this task."

Having finalized the plan to besiege Chuzhou City, Lu Fei had Luo Hong lead a musketeer unit to cut off the main road south of Chuzhou City. In this way, Chuzhou City was completely surrounded by the Southern Expeditionary Army.

Facing the Southern Expeditionary Army's blatant deployment, no army inside Chuzhou City dared to come out and fight. Xiao Han could only watch helplessly as Chuzhou City became surrounded on all sides.

Seeing this, he immediately sent a carrier pigeon message to Jinling City, hoping for a pincer attack on the Southern Expeditionary Army.

At the same time, Ye Qingyun, with the help of sixteen warships and fifty large merchant ships, loaded soldiers onto the ships during the night. The next day, the fleet sailed directly towards Jinling City along the Yangtze River.

It must be said that this landing in Jinling City was a risky military operation. If this battle succeeded, Jinling City could be taken in one fell swoop, and Prince Wei might even be captured. In that case, the cities of Wei would be like dragons without a leader, easily broken one by one.

However, according to information provided by Li San, Prince Wei had placed most of the cannons purchased from Qingzhou in Jinling City, and there were even musketeers in the city. Compared to other cities, Jinling City was a tough nut to crack.

“Depart!”

At the scheduled time, the warships carrying the Dengzhou army and newly recruited soldiers advanced towards Jinling City. On the flagship’s deck, Ye Qingyun walked to Yue Yun’s side, standing shoulder to shoulder, his gaze somewhat sharp.

Yue Yun smiled upon seeing him. “After two battles, Governor Ye has become much more seasoned.”

“General Yue, you jest. This subordinate merely witnessed Prince Wei’s atrocities in Yangzhou and felt a great deal of sorrow.”

Yue Yun was silent for a moment, then said, “I have also heard about this matter. With the Great Yu Empire crumbling, the common people suffer the most. Precisely for this reason, we should wholeheartedly support His Highness in restoring the legitimacy of the Great Yu Empire.”

Ye Qingyun's expression was firm. He said, "General Yue speaks well. The great barbarian menace in the north has not yet been removed. It is crucial to resolve the domestic problems of the Great Yu Empire as soon as possible."

"More than just the barbarians, Great Yu's true enemy is at sea," Yue Yun frowned.

"Oh? I wonder what insights General Yue has?"

After receiving Xiao Ming's order, Yue Yun had come to Tongzhou. At the same time, he left a thousand soldiers stationed in the Sanmyo Kingdom to ensure its safety. He said, "Besides the barbarians, there is also Japan. The current Japan is also equipped with matchlock guns and has been trained by the Dutch. Fighting them will certainly be different from fighting the Great Yu Empire's vassal princes."

"Secondly, Western countries beyond Japan are extending their feelers towards the Great Yu Empire. The Dutch have already warned His Highness that a battle will certainly be inevitable then."

Ye Qingyun shook his head upon hearing this. "The Great Yu Empire is truly beset by misfortunes, and it just so happens to be in a turbulent period. If that's the case, then it's even more imperative to stabilize the country sooner."

Speaking of this, Ye Qingyun realized why Xiao Ming wanted to go straight for Jinling City—it was to end the war in Wei as soon as possible.

Currently, the Great Yu Empire only had the royal bloodline in Wei, Yong, and Qi. All other cities were occupied by vassal princes of different surnames. Only by taking the prosperous Wei and controlling the sources of ore could they acquire the capital to fight for supremacy in the world.

Thinking of this, a glimmer of determination flashed in Ye Qingyun's eyes.

Chapter 597

Jinling City, Prince Wei's mansion.

A carrier pigeon broke the morning's tranquility. After learning that the Southern Expeditionary Army was approaching Chuzhou, Prince Wei urgently dispatched 130,000 elite troops to reinforce it. However, with the news returned by the pigeon, his heart suddenly felt as if it had been plunged into ice water.

"Chuzhou is besieged, the situation is critical. I hope Imperial Father will dispatch a large army to rescue it. Then, with an inside-outside attack, we can annihilate the Southern Expeditionary Army in one fell swoop." Prince Wei's hands trembled slightly after reading the letter.

In the main hall, a group of ministers stood in two rows, civil and military officials alike looking at Prince Wei, awaiting his decision.

"His Royal Highness the Crown Prince is in dire straits. Your Highness should dispatch a large army to rescue him at this time," a civil official said.

As soon as the civil official finished speaking, a general said, "Your Highness, absolutely not! This is a trap set by the Southern Expeditionary Army. His Royal Highness the Crown Prince almost took away half of Jinling City's elite troops, yet he is now trapped in Chuzhou City. This shows that the current situation on the battlefield is not favorable."

"If that's the case, then we should all the more go to rescue His Royal Highness the Crown Prince," the civil official said urgently.

Prince Wei's expression was uncertain. The general who had just spoken was Lu Meng, the garrison captain of Jinling City. Although Xiao Han tried hard to conceal what had happened in Chuzhou, discerning people could immediately see what had truly transpired.

The situation in Chuzhou City was undoubtedly grim.

"Your Highness, it is not advisable to mobilize Jinling City's army again at this time. Yangzhou's Dengzhou army is also eyeing us covetously. If Jinling City's forces are empty, it is highly likely that they will seize the opportunity to enter," Lu Meng said.

The civil official immediately showed displeasure and said to Prince Wei, "Your Highness, if His Royal Highness the Crown Prince is captured, what then? Are we to watch Prince Qi execute His Royal Highness the Crown Prince with our own eyes?"

Prince Wei's expression was grave. This was indeed a difficult choice. After pondering for a moment, he asked an official seated on his lower left, "Have there been any unusual movements from the armies in Yangzhou and Tongzhou?"

"Reporting to Your Highness, the Yangzhou garrison has been quiet, and our informants in Tongzhou have not reported any unusual movements from the Tongzhou army," the official said.

Prince Wei nodded. At this moment, a glimmer of hope suddenly rose in his heart. He said, "The Southern Expeditionary Army led by Lu Fei is Xiao Ming's elite. If we can defeat the Southern Expeditionary Army, Xiao Ming will surely retreat. And the 100,000 strong army in Chuzhou City is also

our Wei's elite. If we don't rescue them, I fear they will all die at the hands of the Southern Expeditionary Army." Prince Wei said.

Lu Meng said urgently upon hearing this, "Your Highness, don't you understand even now? Our army is no match for the Southern Expeditionary Army, which possesses firearms. At this point, even if more people go, it will be futile. Moreover, Your Highness's massacre in Yangzhou has already lost the people's support. Even if a large army leaves the city, how many soldiers would be willing to risk their lives for Your Highness? The only way now is to inform Prince Yan, Prince Liang, and Prince Zhao of the current situation. The three families were all witnesses to the truce that day. Now that Xiao Ming has torn up the truce agreement, it is an open act of treachery. The four families should jointly attack him to force his retreat, otherwise, Wei will have no hope of recovery."

"How dare you, Lu Meng! You are boosting others' morale and diminishing our own prestige! The massacre in Yangzhou left the Dengzhou army without food, which precisely proves Your Highness's wise decision, and is not something you can slander," the civil officials accused.

This scorched-earth policy was precisely proposed by the civil officials.

Lu Meng sneered as he watched the group of literati. He said, "Now, the common people of the four prefectures are all praising Prince Qi and regarding us as enemies. Doesn't that prove anything?"

"What does a mere captain like you know?"

"Exactly, talking nonsense!"

"..."

The civil officials immediately grew anxious and gesticulated at Lu Meng.

Prince Wei was also displeased. This Lu Meng was merely a garrison captain, a petty official in Jinling City before. Now, due to the urgency of the war, all generals were summoned for discussion, yet he was speaking so boastfully.

With a soft snort, Prince Wei said, "No need to say more. The Crown Prince must be saved, and these three vassal princes also need to be contacted. You may all disperse."

With that, Prince Wei waved his hand, dismissing the officials.

He then ordered another 50,000 troops from Jinling City to head to Chuzhou City, and at the same time sent someone to summon Xiao Qi to the princely estate.

Soon, a weary-looking Xiao Qi arrived in the main hall and simply bowed to Prince Wei.

Prince Wei, seeing this, suddenly smiled and said, "Worthy nephew, my imperial uncle merely misspoke that day. I hope worthy nephew does not mind. My imperial uncle has raised you for so many years, do you not understand this intention? This war is urgent, and my imperial uncle hopes you will once again go as an envoy to Yan, Liang, and Chang'an, to have the three families raise an army to help."

Xiao Qi glanced at Prince Wei, a hint of undetectable mockery flashing in his eyes. He bowed and said, "Imperial Uncle, I do not mind what Imperial Uncle said that day. At this critical juncture, I naturally will not shirk my duty."

Prince Wei breathed a sigh of relief. Xiao Qi was familiar with the task, and having him go to seek reinforcements this time was naturally the most suitable choice. So he said, "This is excellent."

"However, Prince Yan, Prince Zhao, and Prince Liang are all moved by profit. If you want them to send troops, two million taels of silver will probably be indispensable," Xiao Qi said.

Prince Wei's fat face stiffened. Although Jinling's treasury was abundant, expenses had been huge lately. But seeing Wei in danger of collapse, he gritted his teeth and said, "I will have someone take you to the treasury to retrieve it."

Xiao Qi smiled and nodded. Then he said, "Imperial Uncle, with chaos everywhere now and bandits rampant on the roads, I was almost robbed on the way to Yan last time. So, please dispatch Captain Lu Meng to escort me. I heard that Lu Meng is highly skilled in martial arts and will surely ensure my safety."

"That's simple enough. I will have Lu Meng summoned for you now," Prince Wei said.

Only then did Xiao Qi nod with satisfaction.

That day, chests of silver and gold were moved from Jinling City's treasury and transported to merchant ships at Jinling's dock. The transfer lasted an entire afternoon. Early the next morning, Xiao Qi and Lu Meng appeared at Jinling's dock. The two led twenty merchant ships upriver towards Yan.

After traveling fifty li, the merchant ships left Jinling City's vicinity. At this point, Xiao Qi and Lu Meng exchanged glances. Xiao Qi said, "Kill all of Prince Wei's men."

"Yes, Your Royal Highness." Lu Meng's eyes turned cold. With a whistle, the guards on the merchant ships immediately drew their sabers and slashed at the officials accompanying Xiao Qi on his mission to Yan.

Instantly, screams of agony erupted from the merchant ships, followed by the sound of bodies being thrown into the water.

Everyone was killed. At this point, Lu Meng said, "I thought Your Royal Highness still hadn't figured it out."

"Jinling City will fall within a few days. If we don't leave now, when will we?" Xiao Qi's eyes were profound.

"So, where are we going now?" Lu Meng asked.

After a moment of thought, Xiao Qi said, "Xiao Ming has changed so much because of the Western missionaries' teachings. I want to see what's truly different about the West."

Chapter 598

"Your Highness wants to go to the West?"

Lu Meng exclaimed.

Xiao Qi gently shook his head, "No. Some time ago, Prince Wei kept asking me to find Western merchants to buy muskets and cannons. But unexpectedly, at sea, our people encountered General Liang Daping, my Imperial Father's old subordinate. Now General Liang has turned bandit, becoming a pirate near Luzon Island, and he said that there is a country founded by descendants of the Great Yu Empire on Luzon Island, named Huayan Kingdom."

"Huayan Kingdom?" Lu Meng said, shocked.

"Yes, I didn't believe it at first, but General Liang spoke with certainty. He said that this group of Great Yu Empire descendants had settled on Luzon Island for hundreds of years. They came to this island along the ocean before the Great Yu Empire existed. However, the Huayan Kingdom was occupied by the Portuguese thirty years ago. Now, the rulers of the Huayan Kingdom are the Portuguese. General Liang said that by going to the Huayan Kingdom, we can make contact with Westerners."

"But Your Highness, since this Huayan Kingdom is occupied by the Portuguese, won't we also be bullied by the Portuguese if we go there?" Lu Meng asked worriedly.

Xiao Qi smiled, "With General Liang, we won't be in danger. Besides, there's no longer a place for us in the Great Yu Empire. In my opinion, this world will inevitably belong to Xiao Ming in the future, and he now knows my identity. When he ascends the throne, how could he tolerate the son of an enemy remaining in this world?"

“Your Highness is absolutely right,” Lu Meng said solemnly, “No matter where Your Highness goes, we will follow Your Highness to the death.”

Xiao Qi revealed a bitter smile. In the Duke Ning’s Rebellion case back then, many of Duke Ning’s old subordinates escaped. Lu Meng was one of them. For years, Lu Meng had lived in Wei. If Xiao Qi hadn’t been disheartened, perhaps they would have lived their lives in Wei under this identity, but now, everything was over.

After killing the officials on the ship, the merchant ships changed course and entered the Yangtze River, heading towards the estuary. On the third day, they encountered the Qingzhou fleet coming towards them.

When he saw these warships, a smile appeared on Xiao Qi’s face.

“Your Highness, you should hide for now,” Lu Meng said, somewhat nervous.

“No need. No one can recognize me now.” Xiao Qi’s face was dark, like a merchant who had been traveling for years. His clothes had also been changed to ordinary merchant attire.

The soldiers on the ship had also taken off their military uniforms, dressed like ordinary crew members. Their merchant ship passed the fleet on the other side of the river.

Not far away on land was Jinling City, where they had lived for over a decade.

Lu Meng was still a little nervous, but the river was full of merchant ships, and the Qingzhou fleet seemed not to have noticed them. They only breathed a sigh of relief when the merchant ships gradually moved away.

Then they suddenly heard the “rumbling” sound of cannons.

“Your Highness, it has begun,” Lu Meng sighed. “Prince Wei has dispatched another 50,000 men to Chuzhou. Now there are only 120,000 men in Jinling City. Whether they can hold out is truly an unknown.”

Xiao Qi’s gaze was cold. “We’ve said what needed to be said. How could Xiao Ming give up the opportunity to attack Jinling City? I just never expected Xiao Ming to use warships and merchant ships to conceal troops and launch a surprise attack on Jinling City.”

Lu Meng looked at the Qingzhou merchant ships. Just moments ago, there were only a few boatmen on board, but now the ships were filled with soldiers dressed in dark green uniforms.

“Xiao Ming is truly bold,” Lu Meng said.

“It’s not that he’s bold; it’s his confidence in his own army,” Xiao Qi said. “It’s a pity for the rich land of Wei. Prince Wei is very clever, but only in small ways; he can’t achieve great things. If he had agreed to ally with Xiao Ming back then, at least he could have been a carefree prince in the future. Now, Xiao Ming probably won’t leave him anything.”

Lu Meng nodded. The merchant ships were getting further and further from Jinling City, and the sound of cannons gradually diminished. They would temporarily bid farewell to the Great Yu Empire.

After a round of shelling at the Jinling City dock, Yue Yun had the warships berth alongside the dock, while merchant ships also gradually docked. At this time, the Dengzhou army disembarked and quickly occupied the Jinling City dock.

At the same time, the field guns on the warships were also hoisted down.

The commotion at the dock naturally attracted the attention of Jinling City. For a moment, the entire Jinling City fell into chaos. Prince Wei hastily got out of bed and asked, "What's going on? What's going on?"

Officials and generals in Jinling City also heard the cannon fire. After inquiring, they rushed frantically into Prince Wei's mansion.

"Your Highness, it's bad! The Dengzhou army has attacked!" the officials shouted.

"What!" Prince Wei was greatly alarmed. "Didn't you say the Yangzhou garrison had no unusual movements?"

"This subordinate doesn't know what's going on either. The Yangzhou garrison certainly didn't move!" the official said urgently.

Prince Wei flew into a rage, kicking the official and cursing, "Scoundrel! Useless! Why aren't you immediately gathering the army to defend the city!"

“Yes, Your Highness,” the officials scrambled out.

Seeing the officials leave, Prince Wei immediately ascended the city wall of Jinling City. When he saw the Dengzhou army disembarking at the dock, his face instantly turned ashen white.

“Your Highness, the Dengzhou army numbers over 30,000.” The defending general pointed to the Dengzhou army forming squares on the dock, noting that a portion of the Dengzhou army was already approaching Jinling City.

Cold sweat beaded on Prince Wei’s forehead. Now, only 5,000 cavalry remained in Jinling City; most of the soldiers had been transferred to Chuzhou City. It was impossible to send cavalry to attack now.

How could 5,000 men be a match for 30,000?

“Summon the musketeers! Get all the gunners onto the city walls! We must defend Jinling City to the death! Prince Yan’s army will come to save us! Prince Zhao will too, and Prince Liang will too!” Prince Wei was incoherent.

Below Jinling City, the Dengzhou army had basically all disembarked from the ships. For an hour, no army attacked them, which made their landing very safe.

When the soldiers had assembled, Ye Qingyun said, “Soldiers, before you is Jinling City! Prince Wei is in Jinling City! As long as we take Jinling City, Wei will be within our grasp! You must also know that thehardtack on the ships is only enough for two days. If we don’t take Jinling City within these two days, we will all starve to death here! We have no retreat now!”

The soldiers pressed their lips tightly. They naturally understood Ye Qingyun's meaning. After they landed, the Qingzhou warships left the dock and began to return. Now, they were left below Jinling City.

Looking at the gradually departing warships, a resolute look appeared in the soldiers' eyes.

"But everyone, do not worry! Jinling City has plenty to eat! As long as we take Jinling City, you can eat whatever you want, and you will also receive huge rewards, allowing your families to live prosperous lives from now on!"

Under Ye Qingyun's encouragement, the soldiers' expressions gradually became agitated.

Then Ye Qingyun shouted, "Take Jinling City! Charge!"

"Kill!" the soldiers shouted, advancing towards Jinling City.

Ye Qingyun wiped the sweat from his forehead, hoping that his and Yue Yun's act would make the soldiers fight with their backs to the wall.

Chapter 599

"Boom, boom, boom..."

The twelve-pound siege cannons continuously bombarded the city gate and walls. Some of the cannons were used to deal with Prince Wei's cannons on the city ramparts.

In Jinling City, upon learning that their cannons were constantly being deflected by the long-range Dengzhou cannons, Prince Wei was furious. "Xiao Ming, you scoundrels are ruining me!"

Just as he was cursing, a sudden, huge collapsing sound came. The city wall of the South Gate, under the continuous bombardment of cannons, completely collapsed from the middle.

Seeing this, Prince Wei's face turned from white to black. Among the princes of Xiao Wenxuan's era, only he had never been to a battlefield. At this moment, he was at a loss.

But he at least understood one thing: the breach of the city gate meant that Jinling City was about to fall. He himself no longer believed they could defeat the Dengzhou army.

"Boom." Soon, the city wall on the other side of the South Gate also collapsed with a roar.

"Soldiers, charge!" At this moment, Ye Qingyun, holding a long sword, was the first to rush forward. The soldiers holding flintlock guns followed closely behind, charging into Jinling City like ferocious tigers descending from the mountains, through the city gate and the breaches in the city wall.

The Wei army soldiers inside the city woke up as if from a dream. Then they saw a green torrent rush into the city, facing nothing but soldiers holding long spears. Before he could even shout, he felt a chill in his chest, then he watched his own blood spurt from his chest. Before dying, extreme fear made him let out one last shriek.

After entering the city, the Dengzhou army soldiers were like tigers entering a flock of sheep. With long-range shooting and close-quarters bayonets, the coordination between long and short range was highly

skilled. The Wei army that came to stop their entry was usually routed after just a few volleys of shots and bayonet charges.

The chaos in the South quickly spread throughout Jinling City. The air throughout the city was filled with the stench of death. Prince Wei, protected by his personal guards, rallied his soldiers. Everything before him exceeded his imagination. He watched the continuous rout of Wei's elite forces. His body was colder than winter blades. A voice told him that it was all over now. Wherever the Dengzhou army passed, it was like slaughtering cattle and sheep, leaving behind only cold corpses. Although he desperately yelled orders to attack, the terrified soldiers offered no resistance and were quickly disintegrated.

"Your Highness, let's go! If we don't leave now, it will be too late! The East Gate and West Gate have both been breached by the Dengzhou army. Our city walls simply cannot withstand the cannon fire."

A group of officials pleaded behind Prince Wei. They had initially thought that numbers were an advantage, but they were wrong. Now they completely understood that firearms were the true advantage.

It was truly tragic that Wei's soldiers were shot dead before even engaging the Dengzhou army.

And facing this combat style they had never encountered, the soldiers collapsed very quickly. Coupled with the fact that many soldiers already had reservations about Prince Wei, they fled even faster.

"Yes, Your Highness, where there's life, there's hope," an official advised.

Prince Wei shook his head at this. He said, "You go. I cannot go. Xiao Ming has won, and I have lost."

He knew clearly that all of his direct military units were gone. Even if he escaped to other prefectures, he would only be living at the mercy of other powerful families.

At this moment, many officials no longer cared about Prince Wei. The tide had turned, and when the tree falls, the monkeys scatter. For the officials and generals, they were merely switching masters; there was no need to be buried alongside Prince Wei.

According to the plan, Ye Qingyun led the musketeers to capture the city gate of Jinling City. After defeating Prince Wei's army, Ye Qingyun felt a surge of emotion. Although he already understood the power of firearms, he did not expect such immense destructive power in war.

The Wei army soldiers guarding the city gate numbered at least 6,000, but a few volleys from the musketeers completely wiped out these Wei army soldiers. Not a single Wei army soldier even advanced within ten meters of the musketeers.

After capturing the city gate of Jinling City, Ye Qingyun lit fireworks as agreed. The purpose of these fireworks was simple: to inform Yue Yun that the city had been captured, and at the same time, to signal the soldiers at the east and west gates to attack simultaneously.

"Boom!" The fuse burned down, and then a bright object shot skyward, exploding into a colorful circular pattern in the sky, exceptionally brilliant.

Yue Yun's warships actually hadn't gone far. Seeing the fireworks from Jinling City, he smiled. He knew Ye Qingyun had succeeded.

From morning to afternoon, progress was finally being made.

After capturing the city gate, Ye Qingyun did not stop. He wanted to expand the results of the battle, so he shouted, "Soldiers, it's time to reap the enemy's heads! Charge!"

"Kill!" The soldiers' morale was high. Having fought with their backs to the wall to take the city, and now seeing the entry into the city, they didn't want to let the high rewards escape, especially from the powerful families and influential figures within the city.

The rumbling footsteps pounded continuously. Hearing this sound, Prince Wei's soldiers completely lost the will to fight and fled, with more choosing to lay down their weapons and surrender to the Dengzhou army.

The subsequent battle became very easy. Ye Qingyun advanced from south to north, encountering almost no resistance along the way. Everywhere, Prince Wei's soldiers were kneeling on the ground.

"Governor, this is Prince Wei's mansion!" a soldier said, pointing to a residence not far away.

Ye Qingyun looked and immediately smiled with delight. He said, "Soldiers, surround Prince Wei's mansion. Don't let anyone inside escape. There might be some important figures in there."

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The sound of cannons and smoke across the city was the last elegy for Prince Wei's rule over Jinling City.

Ye Qingyun led the soldiers to storm Prince Wei's mansion. In the end, they only found some maids and servants who had not had time to escape.

"Prince Wei must have fled." Ye Qingyun frowned. This was within his expectations. After all, like the previous strategy, they adopted a three-sided encirclement, leaving one side open for the enemy to escape.

Now, fighting with their backs to the wall, the most important objective was to occupy Jinling City. As long as Jinling City fell, the southern and northern parts of Wei would fall into their hands, and Wei would face a pincer attack from both north and south.

"You few stay and guard Prince Wei's mansion. Other soldiers, follow me to take Jinling's treasury." Ye Qingyun's expression was solemn. Wei was renowned for its wealth throughout the land. Taking the treasury would greatly solve the state's financial problems, and this would also be a great merit for him.

With that, he continued to lead his soldiers past Prince Wei's mansion and attack southwards.

Jinling City was still in chaos. Wei's soldiers had no will to fight; they either surrendered or took the opportunity to loot the city and flee outside. Along the way, Ye Qingyun rarely encountered any decent resistance.

The battle became exceptionally smooth after entering the city. Dengzhou army soldiers surged into the city from three sides. By evening, they had essentially occupied Jinling City, taking over the city's government offices, treasury, granaries, barracks, and other facilities.

As night fell, Ye Qingyun wiped the blood from his saber. He could no longer remember how many soldiers had fallen by his sword today, but thankfully, the war was over.

“Governor, a man claiming to be Zhang Yi has arrived from outside the city. He says Prince Wei is with him,” a captain said, bowing.

Ye Qingyun’s hand, wiping his saber, stopped. He said, “Zhang Yi? Who is that?”

“Zhang Yi’s Zhang family is the largest powerful family in Jinling City, and his daughter is Prince Wei’s concubine.” At this moment, a voice sounded, and Li San walked in from outside the tent.

“The Zhang family?” Ye Qingyun sneered, “They are truly cunning.”

“That’s not surprising. Even a fool can see that Wei’s power is gone. Now is the time to seek a new master, what else?” Li San said indifferently. He had been outside Jinling City during the siege. Now, every time a city was captured, the Secret Guard had to enter it, on one hand for propaganda, and on the other hand to purge the local powerful families.

This purge included two aspects: providing intelligence to eliminate powerful families with ulterior motives, and supervising the disbandment of their private forces, confiscating their property, and making them completely ordinary common people.

To reduce soldier casualties and break the powerful families’ will to resist, Xiao Ming did not adopt a policy of complete annihilation.

It was precisely because of this policy that many powerful families still harbored illusions, hoping to preserve their foundations by rendering meritorious service. There had already been similar examples in the battles to attack prefectures and counties near Pengzhou City.

“Taking on a new master? Hmph, why not kill them all?” After the Yangzhou incident, Ye Qingyun now harbored extreme hatred for the powerful families.

“That cannot be. If His Highness hadn’t allowed the powerful families to surrender, could your 30,000 men have occupied Jinling City so easily? The massacre in Yangzhou was said to be for revenge, but it was actually just to raise military provisions. Moreover, currently, only the principal offenders among Qingzhou’s powerful families have died; everyone else has been relocated to various places to farm, and now they are quite well-behaved.”

Ye Qingyun nodded. “Is His Highness planning to do the same this time?”

“No, His Highness said that this time, the powerful families of Wei will be tried by the local common people. Those who committed heinous crimes will be beheaded without exception. Those who followed them will be conscripted into forced labor. Those who are innocent will be reduced to common people, and all their family property will be confiscated.”

“Haha, worthy of His Highness! This method is much more severe than that for the powerful families in the state. In this way, the powerful families of Wei will essentially vanish.”

Li San nodded. His responsibility this time was to establish militias and production teams in each prefecture and county. After Jinling City was stabilized, it would be time for the trials of the powerful families. However, even the surrendered powerful families had to be temporarily detained before that.

The two chatted for a while. Then Ye Qingyun gestured to his personal guard to let Zhang Yi in.

Soon, Zhang Yi, dressed in a patched garment, walked in. Behind him was a disheveled Prince Wei.

"Greetings, Governor. I, Zhang Yi, head of the Zhang family of Jinling City, specially present Prince Wei to the Governor," Zhang Yi said nervously.

Ye Qingyun glanced at Zhang Yi. The man was half a hundred years old, with graying hair and a thin build. Coupled with his patched clothes, he looked like a beggar.

Li San and Ye Qingyun were both surprised by Zhang Yi's appearance.

Then the two looked at Prince Wei. Ye Qingyun had not seen Prince Wei before, but Li San had. At this moment, he said, "Your Royal Highness Prince Wei, if you had known this day would come, why didn't you agree to the alliance back then? Now you wouldn't have to be a prisoner."

"Bastard! How dare you, a mere dog servant, insult me! Even if I lost, I am still Xiao Ming's imperial uncle. When I reach Qingzhou City, he will still have to treat me well," Prince Wei cursed.

Then he turned to Zhang Yi: "You heartless wretch! You greedily stayed for your family's property and didn't escape in time, instead, you captured me to claim credit! I truly regret not exterminating your whole family!"

Zhang Yi's face turned green then white, then white then green. As Prince Wei said, after the Dengzhou army attacked Jinling City, he ordered his household retainers to gather gold, silver, and valuables. But when he was ready to leave, the Dengzhou army had already fully occupied Jinling City.

In his despair, he discovered Prince Wei, who was mixed in the crowd. It turned out that under the persuasion of officials, Prince Wei had finally decided to flee, but it was already too late. So, a plan came to his mind: to capture Prince Wei and atone for his sins with this merit.

Facing Prince Wei's curses, Li San was unconcerned. He said indifferently, "His Highness Prince Qi has always remembered Your Royal Highness Prince Wei's collusion with the powerful families of Qingzhou to harm him. Whether you will be treated well then depends on Your Highness's fortune."

Prince Wei's expression immediately turned extremely ugly upon hearing this.

Ye Qingyun, on the other hand, said, "You ordered soldiers to plunder and massacre. Over a hundred thousand innocent common people in Yangzhou City died tragically. How could His Highness forgive a foolish king like you?"

With that, he said to the soldiers in the tent, "Imprison Zhang Yi and Prince Wei. Await His Highness's command."

"Yes." The soldiers immediately raised their bayonets, pointing at Zhang Yi and Prince Wei.

Zhang Yi was greatly alarmed. He shouted, "The Governor must have made a mistake! I captured Prince Wei; even if there's no merit, there's no fault!"

"Hmph, you are the head of the Zhang family of Jinling City, and your daughter is Prince Wei's concubine. Do you take me for a fool? Moreover, you betrayed your master, utterly shameless," Ye Qingyun said angrily.

Upon hearing this, Zhang Yi was instantly devastated, and his body began to tremble uncontrollably.

The two were led away. Li San said, "With Jinling City taken, the situation is set. Prince Wei's son, Xiao Han, being trapped in Chuzhou is only a matter of time. The remaining few prefectures have few soldiers and generals, so they are not worth mentioning at all."

Ye Qingyun nodded. The Battle of Jinling City could be said to have decided the fate of the war.